

SUBJECT: Defection of Pathet Lao Troops to Royal Lao Government

1. The intensification of North Vietnamese aggression in Laos, especially since the ouster of Sihanouk in Cambodia, and the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) military offensives against the Royal Lao Government (RLG) is causing increasing problems in the relationship between the Pathet Lao (PL) and the NVA forces. The military occupation of Lao territory by NVA forces and the treatment of the Lao by these forces has brought to the surface the nationalist feeling of the Lao and their underlying antipathy toward the North Vietnamese. As a result, an increasing number of Pathet Lao military personnel and civilians are defecting to join with the RLG to face the NVA as the common enemy. This significant development demonstrates that the relatively low profile U. S. support to the RLG is having the desired impact, despite the territorial gains of the NVA forces. The U. S. has not played a direct role in inducing these defections; this development is strictly an internal Lao matter and is a natural consequence of the contrast between U. S. and North Vietnamese involvement in Laos.

2. This situation is best exemplified by a United Press International story filed 29 September 1971 which cited the defection of a high ranking PL political officer, identified as Thao Bounsong, to the RLG. Bounsong said that Prince Souphanouvong, Chairman of the Central Committee of the Patriotic Front, was deeply concerned and worried about the mass defection of PL troops in South Laos. He claimed to have been sent as a special representative of Prince Souphanouvong to Southern Laos to halt the defections and to mediate the split between the PL and the NVA. Bounsong said the split was unbridgable and he himself finally decided to join with the other PL defectors and rally to the RLG.

3. During the last six months an estimated 900-950 PL troops have rallied to the RLG. This total, which does not include hundreds of refugees, includes at least 53 officers and 70 political cadres. The ralliers have come from 12 identified PL battalions, two Deuanist Neutralist battalions, the South Laos Tactical Region Headquarters, and from various PL and Neo Lao Hak Sat (NLHS) province headquarters staffs. The total number of ralliers to date constitutes roughly eight percent of the estimated 12,000 armed PL troops in South Laos.

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4. The reasons given for rallying by the PL troops were listed as a growing disenchantment of the PL with the NVA, the news that PL General Phomma was murdered by the NVA, the employment of brutal disciplinary tactics by the NVA against the PL (including assassination of other senior PL officers), the development of open conflict between the PL and the NVA and the awareness of the PL that they would be well received by the RLG if they rallied. There has developed a self-perpetuating momentum in the rallier program, as group after group has rallied. Elements of battalions from which significant numbers have rallied find themselves under greater suspicion and in greater danger, thus creating or reinforcing the desire to rally. In a number of cases PL ralliers have had to fight their way out from NVA forces encircling them to prevent such defections.